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**SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke**

The free tennis lessons an outfit offered a few years ago in San Angelo are sure paying off when the rattlesnakes are out of their dens and crawling across my front yard to go to water. Developing a swift double handed back stroke with a sharp-shooter shovel is the best defensives strategy being used against the size rattler found out here.

After the tennis coach drilled me on the proper grip and correct stance, and by practicing swatting grasshoppers at close range take-offs polished by timing. I can make one of those cobra-killing mongoose think he's going to have to be fitted in bifocals and start using a set of spurs like a fighting chicken to carry on his craft.

Learning to hold my ground was a problem at first; however, a snake book one of my grandkids left at the ranch explained that in many instances Western diamond back wastes 20 to 30 seconds before he strikes. Figuring Roy Cooper and some of those other expert calf ropers can catch and tie a crossbred calf in nine and some odd seconds, a student who has learned to keep his eye on the ball (and in my case, his eye on the grasshopper) may have as much as a 15-second margin to swing. I want to emphasize, if you throw down the shovel and run, the penalty is worse than the 10-second charge for breaking the barrier in a roping arena.

The key is to work out with old garden hoses and pick the size shovel best fitted to your swing. I prefer a standard 48-inch overall length shovel, but in a tall grass country a snub handled, shorter model might be faster and handier to use.

On the subject of grass, out on these ranches where garden clubs are a rarity, strip mowing works the best for snake detection. By leaving 16-foot long swaths 21 inches wide, I can see the snakes before they see me. Just that small amount of cover must make them think like an ostrich, or a member of the homo sapiens species who thinks being out of town makes him invisible.

Don't misunderstand these recommendations. The goal is not to injure the snake, but to knock him cold enough so he can be relocated farther away from our houses. Way, way back, an African explorer named Frank Buck wrote books on capturing wild animals alive. His influence continues up to this very day. Stunning a snake with a shovel may not be as gentle as netting a butterfly, but by reducing the calibers of our weaponry we may be forestalling serious investigations by our adversaries.